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ABSTRACT

In light of factors that hinder teachers in the use of drama and theatre in classroom application, this Digest explains the "myths" of drama and theatre and focuses on their effect on children's literacy development. In addition, rather than presenting a "tour de force" of resources, this Digest highlights some readily applicable strategies for classroom application. It discusses the confusing terminology; the necessity of dramatic activities; facilitating effective dramatic activities (dramatics story re-enactments, drama activities that promote vocabulary development, and incorporating process drama into writing instruction); and the myth of "playful" dramatic activities. (Contains 12 references.) (RS)

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by Ping-Yun Sun

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Using Drama and Theatre to Promote Literacy Development: Some Basic Classroom Applications

y Ping-Yun Sun

Although numerous researchers have emphasized the emendous effect drama and theatre can have on children's gnitive and affective development as well as provided undant resources for teachers, there still exists a gap etween understanding its value and actually applying it urman, 2000). The reasons teachers still hesitate to embrace e ideas of utilizing drama and theatre in classroom activities n be summarized as follows: (1) In the search for drama sources to develop curricula, teachers are easily verwhelmed by various terms used in drama and theatre, ch as creative drama, creative dramatics, developmental ama, process drama, educational drama, improvisational ama, improvisation, informal drama, classroom drama, ama in education, etc. (2) Dramatic activities tend to be aced at the "edge" of the official curriculum; they seem to e time-consuming and unnecessary. (3) Since most teacher ducation programs do not offer courses related to drama and eatre, teachers are unfamiliar with facilitating dramatic tivities (Furman, 2000). (4) Dramatic activities are so playful at teachers might be afraid that children will not take arning seriously. In light of these factors that hinder achers in the use of drama and theatre in classroom plication, this Digest will explain the "myths" of drama and eatre and focus on their effect on children's literacy velopment. In addition, rather than presenting a tour de rce of resources, this Digest will highlight some readily plicable strategies for classroom application.

he confusing terminology

Historically, the field of drama for children in America as been associated more with pedagogy than with theatre udies; hence, theories are generated more from education an theatre arts or performance studies. However, ractitioners cannot agree on one specific title to define their rt, so all the terms listed above have been used. These terms sually reflect the various methods practiced by these eorists (Woodson, 1999). "Drama" and "theatre" generally fer to the process and the production, respectively; however, classroom application, the focus should be shifted from arning drama to emphasizing the process of learning through ama. In this Digest, activities that incorporate drama and eatre methods will be referred to as "dramatic activities."

he necessity of dramatic activities

Dramatic activities are crucial to early literacy velopment because children can be involved in reading and riting as a holistic and meaningful communication process McNamee, McLane, Cooper, & Kerwin, 1985). In addition, esearchers have discovered that the mental requirements for nderstanding drama are similar to those for reading. For stance, the meaning of a reading is generally grasped in a ransaction between the reader and the text. "Process rama" refers to a teaching method that involves children in naginary, unscripted, and spontaneous scenes, in which the meaning is made from the engagement and transactions between the teacher and students (Schneider & Jackson, 2000). In addition, reading can also stand for a "process of interpreting the world," which endorses drama as a powerful learning medium because it provides a context for children to relate to their lived experience. In writing development, children who experience drama also appear to be more capable of making appropriate linguistic choices as well as expressing opinions or suggesting solutions (McNaughton, 1997).

Facilitating effective dramatic activities

Many teachers feel intimidated by the idea of leading students in dramatic activities; however, most dramatic activities do not require teachers to have direct theatre experience (Beehner, 1990). The intriguing nature of drama and theatre lies in its flexibility, plasticity, and continuity. There are no specific patterns or models for most dramatic activities. When drama and theatre serve as teaching methods, teachers should view them as a concept and a philosophy rather than a set of curriculum models. Several applicable dramatic activities are:

Using dramatic story reenactments to develop children's narrative competence

In dramatic story reenactments (DSR), children act out or use puppets to informally perform the stories they recreate. In her research, Martinez (1993) explained in detail how teachers can foster children's sense of story structure by encouraging DSR, which promotes their narrative competence. For children from preschool to second grade, researchers have demonstrated that children who reenact stories are better at connecting and integrating events to storytelling than children in a story reading group (Saltz & Johnson, 1974). DSR can also increase children's curiosity about literature before independent reading begins (McMaster, 1998). Martinez further described how the teacher in her kindergarten classroom supports spontaneous, child-initiated, and child-directed DSR activities. The teacher frequently used repeated readings, predictable stories, and intense response activities, and she also cooperated with a second grade class, having some of its students come to her class and do DSR for her kindergarteners. She also designed a very comfortable classroom library center, which is the most visited spot where children will reenact stories spontaneously.

Drama activities that promote vocabulary development

Vocabulary proficiency plays a crucial role in children's literacy development. In their studies, Alber and Foil (2003) illustrate how to effectively introduce new vocabulary and facilitate the learning activities with dramatic techniques. "Creating a memorable event" is recommended when introducing new vocabulary. The authors depict several scenarios in the article. For instance, while children are getting ready for the class, teachers might say, "Ok, it's time to do some work. Take your cat, rock your desk, and start to write

ut the trees on the ceiling." Students are likely to respond h "what?" or "that doesn't make any sense." Teachers can ntinue this "game" until everybody pays attention and looks zzled. Teachers then respond with "I'm sorry. I am being oherent. So, what do you think incoherent means?"

To reinforce and extend comprehension, teachers can d students stories that contain the new vocabulary words. ey may also ask students to act out the corresponding action have them draw a word card out of the new vocabulary box, d act out the definition for other children to guess. For er children, teachers can ask them to create a skit strating the meaning of a vocabulary term. Teachers should p students to understand vocabulary in the context of rature by providing relevant literature pieces. Teachers n also list several new vocabulary items and have students ite short stories using them.

orporating process drama into writing instruction

How does drama extend children's literacy development d how does children's writing demonstrate their gagement with and understanding of literary texts? mpler and Schneider (2002) conduct a cross-study analysis writing from first, second, and third grade classrooms to swer these questions. In the first grade classroom, the acher and his first graders read *Where the Wild Things Are* ndak, 1963). Then, the teacher placed the students in roles "wild things," so that they had the chance to view the story m the perspective of characters within the text. The acher then asked them questions (in the case of this story, w they survived on their island), which helped children to borate on their characters. In the process, some children veloped a new character: Maxina, who was Max's older ter. The next day, the teacher took this further, casting the ys as Max and girls as Maxina to travel back to the island. e teacher asked children to describe what might be needed r this journey back to the island. After they "arrived" on the and, the teacher asked what they saw there. After this tivity was completed, the teacher and children spent ten nutes discussing what they thought about it. Then, the acher asked children to respond to the question: Think out the journey to the island, and draw and write about at you like and remember about it. In children's writing, is drama activity seems to have scaffolded children's ability explore the boundaries between reader/writer and aracter/actor and to create sophisticated text and image ationships as developing writers.

In the second and third grade classroom, the teacher and e students studied the topic of immigrants. They first spent veral days reading and discussing immigrants' stories from ildren's literature and the students started to create bleaux or frozen scenes of the immigrants' experiences. en the students had to write, in the role of their characters m the tableau, about what they thought.

In addition, students also created written documents for the migrants such as passports and photo albums. They read both tion and non-fiction and created documentaries on the migrants' lives. As a result, students not only learned about migrants' experiences but also learned to write in roles from hers' perspectives, to write for various purposes, and to write ross different genres. Through this curriculum, children velop a firmer understanding of the role and the relevance hich writing can have in their lives (Schneider & Jackson, 2000).

e myth of "playful" dramatic activities

Teachers need to be aware of that being fun, interesting, d entertaining is only one dimension of drama and theatre, which provides children with strong incentives to learn and to discover. As McMaster (1998) advocated, drama can be an invaluable teaching method, since it supports every aspect of literacy development. From developing their decoding knowledge, fluency, vocabulary, syntactic knowledge, discourse knowledge, and metacognitive knowledge to comprehension of extended texts, drama and theatre in many ways educate children as a whole, and they offer children a more free and flexible space in which to grow and to learn.

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